



## **On Lines and Fences**

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## **ON LINES AND FENCES**

### *LABOUR, COMMUNITY AND VIOLENCE IN AN OIL CITY*

*Rasmus Christian Elling*

In December 1942, unrest broke out in Abadan, arguably Iran's first modern industrial city and home to the world's biggest oil refinery. Two scuffles in the bazaar provoked Iranians from the Ahmadabad neighbourhood to attack Indian labourers in the 'Indian Lines' of the Bahmashir<sup>1</sup> neighbourhood. Although not as bloody or widespread as more well-studied occurrences of unrest in Abadan, I will argue that this 'Bahmashir Incident' is an important case that can aid in understanding the interconnectedness of oil, space and violence. This chapter has two aims.

The first is to fill a gap in the existing literature on Abadan and the oil-producing province of Khuzestan in southwest Iran. This literature tends to focus on the struggles of the native Iranian labour movement against the Anglo-Persian, later Anglo-Iranian, Oil Company (A.I.O.C., henceforth 'the Company'), and specifically on the great oil strikes of 1929 and 1946 and the oil nationalisation movement of 1951.<sup>2</sup> In this literature, a crucial element is normally either mentioned only in passing or simply neglected: imported Indian labour. Using material from, among other places, the underexplored British Petroleum Company archives, I will investigate the context of the Bahmashir Incident synchronically and the history of a particular community (the Indians) diachronically.

These investigations reveal an alternative labour history of Abadan, which, I will argue, can complement and challenge the existing literature.<sup>3</sup> Key Iranian leftist and nationalist accounts of Abadan's history tend to cast all violence in the binary terms of a struggle between 'the oppressor' (the British) and 'the oppressed' (the native Iranians). This chapter will instead propose that since Abadan had multiple subaltern agencies, urban violence operated on several levels. The presence of Indians in Abadan's labour hierarchy and social fabric challenges the idea of Abadan as a 'dual city'<sup>4</sup> and complicates simplistic interpretations of urban violence.

Secondly, by disentangling the web of interests spun between the Company, the British military and the diplomatic machinery, this chapter will nuance the notion, so often reiterated uncritically in Middle East Studies, of 'The British' as a single, cohesive actor. The Company drew on the colonial legacy of British imperialism, was protected by the British military and was influenced by its major shareholder, the British government; yet, the Company was nonetheless an autonomous entity with a distinct mode of operation. In order to 'see like an oil company',<sup>5</sup> this chapter uses the Bahmashir Incident to examine how World War II affected the Company in Abadan on the eve of victorious nationalist movements and the dissolution of the British Empire – events that eventually drove companies born in colonial settings into the present globalized world of neo-liberal corporate capitalism.

To achieve these two aims, I situate the Bahmashir Incident simultaneously within various scales or 'spaces'. On the macro-scale, nineteenth- and twentieth-century trade globalisation had brought venture capitalism to new heights, rapidly enriching and empowering corporations that were brought to life in a favourable colonial setting to extract resources from the Third World. New patterns in energy politics gave immense importance to oil in places like Iran and to enterprises such as the Company.

On the mid-scale, most of the Company's activities were harboured within the Iranian province of Khuzestan. In this remote south-western corner of Iran, I will argue, the Company created a *space of exception*<sup>6</sup>: the area known in official correspondence simply as 'The Concession', which also refers to the contract with the Iranian state under which the Company operated. Here, the Company had negotiated and imposed its existence as an extraterritorial entity since 1908, operating within an existing nation-state that was never formally colonized but was clearly under strong foreign influence. Within the Concession, the Company maintained vital interconnections between the rural and tribal hinterland of 'the Fields', where oil was extracted, and the modern refinery city of Abadan, from where it was exported.

Finally, on the micro-level, the Bahmashir Incident can be used to study the construction and contestation of urban space in Abadan. Kaveh Ehsani and Mark Crinson<sup>7</sup> pioneered the study of Abadan's spatial politics, and it is with inspiration from their fascinating works that the present study focuses on one community and one event in the belief that the micro-scale of urban violence can be understood only within the macro-scale of power politics.

This belief, in turn, mirrors another: that violence should be recognized as a fundamental aspect of everyday politics – not because human beings are innately violent, but because the very social processes and political structures that shape modernity were and are, more often than not, moulded and sustained by violence and coercion.<sup>8</sup> This is especially true for processes and structures that bring about rapacious frontier capitalist enterprises such as an oil industry.<sup>9</sup>

Abrupt, enclaval industrialisation and mass labour migrations under the Company caused fundamental societal changes in Khuzestan. When oil was struck in Masjed Soleyman in 1908, the Company initially recruited unskilled labour among the local inhabitants in the Concession, including Lor, Bakhtiyari and Arab tribesmen, while Europeans handled

engineering tasks requiring technical skills. However, with the oil industry's phenomenal expansion and insatiable appetite for labour, migrant workers flooded the region. In particular, the Company recruited labour from India and Ottoman Iraq, and then people from other parts of Khuzestan, from Iranian cities such as Tehran and Tabriz, as well as from Palestine and Europe. By the 1940s, local Khuzestanis only made up 40 per cent of the Company workforce.<sup>10</sup>

As early as 1910, however, worried British diplomats had presciently called for hiring, as far as possible, Iranian rather than Indian and Ottoman labour.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the question of foreign labour soon became a key issue of contention between the Company and Iran – especially after the ascendancy of the assertive Reza Shah in 1925 and the concomitant wave of nationalist sentiment in the Iranian public. The Company claimed, in the beginning of operations with good reason, that it was impossible to find suitable replacements locally and in Iran. Company archives, however, also imply that recruitment was based on the Orientalist belief that particular ethnic groups were inherently predisposed to certain types of work. By institutionalising a labour hierarchy shaped by these essentialist stereotypes, the Company believed it could optimize productivity and oil output.

This belief is echoed all the way up to 1982: in the British Petroleum Company's official history, R. W. Ferrier argues that among Iranians, 'there was little understanding of the discipline and expertise required for complex industrial operation and little opportunity to attain the necessary technical proficiency'.<sup>12</sup> A more truthful analysis would rather propose that the Company, particularly in the first two decades of operation, systematically denied Iranians this opportunity, and that the Company's treatment of Iranians was in many ways racist.<sup>13</sup>

It was thus Iranians who comprised the general bulk of labour at the bottom of the hierarchy, toiling in the oppressive heat and dangerous conditions of the Fields and the

refinery. For mid-level positions, the Company mainly recruited Indians, while for junior managerial and bureaucratic positions it relied on what Ferrier calls ‘more capable workers’ from among Iranian and Iraqi Christians (Armenians and Chaldeans) and Jews.<sup>14</sup> In short, the British and other white Europeans were at the top of the hierarchy, followed by non-Muslim minorities and Indians, and, at the bottom, Muslim Iranians – which included a diverse mass with numerous internal ethno-linguistic divisions.<sup>15</sup>

### **Coolie Lines: Khuzestan’s Indian Labour History**

In the first phase of labour migration between 1908 and 1920, Indians were brought to Khuzestan to work as skilled and unskilled labour in the Fields and as clerks and menial servants of the British in the rapidly growing cities of Abadan, Masjed-e Soleyman, Ahwaz and Khorramshahr. In 1910, there were 158 Indians out of a total Company workforce in Khuzestan of 1,706. This number doubled in three years, and by 1916, Indians made up nearly half of the workforce in Abadan alone, thus outnumbering Iranians. During World War I, when oil from Abadan’s refinery became crucial in propelling the British navy towards victory, the Government of India suspended a 1910 Emigration Act to further facilitate the flow of labour from India to Khuzestan.

In the second phase of labour migration, which commenced after the Government of India tightened its labour laws in 1920, Indian recruitment shifted to the middle ranks of the workforce. Instead of in the Fields, Indians now worked mostly in the offices, stores and homes of Company management, where they were engaged as salaried semi-skilled and skilled artisans, foremen, clerks, drivers, cooks and servants. There were 3,816 Indians in Abadan in 1922, when they made up one-third of the total workforce in Khuzestan, and their numbers peaked at 4,890 in 1925.<sup>16</sup> As Reidar Visser notices, the Indian community was now ‘strong enough to make the celebration of Ramakrishna’s birthday a major local event’.<sup>17</sup>

To manage the diverse population it had brought together, the Company relied on colonial methods from the British experience in India. Indeed, many of the British men who built and managed the oil industry had previously served in India. Charles Greenway, the managing director in Abadan from 1910-19, had worked for a trading company in India; James M. Wilson, the key planner of the 1930s expansion of Abadan city, had assisted Lutyen, the architect of New Delhi; and numerous other Company officers had served in the British India military. As Michael Dobe has noted, these links to India, especially trade, are ‘crucial to an understanding of [the Company] within the regional and global contexts of the British Empire’.<sup>18</sup> The colonial context was echoed, Crinson adds, in the prevalence of the ‘language of Anglo-India: there were memsahibs and sahibs, tiffin and chota-hazry, godowns, ayahs, and punkahs’.<sup>19</sup>

The British managers also brought with them specific ethnic preferences in personnel employment: Sikhs from the Punjab and Gujaratis were preferred for technical jobs and security; Chittagonians for harbour engineering and naval transport; Goans worked as cooks and servants; and Madrasis as clerks. In general, many Indians performed the role of managerial middlemen between the British and the mass of Iranian labour. As such, they were crucial to the day-to-day operation of the oil complex and an integral part of the social hierarchy in Company Abadan.

In the early days of Company operations, the Indians suffered with all other labourers under harsh, unsanitary conditions in the ‘Coolie Lines’: basic tents and mud huts, the type of dwellings ubiquitous in colonial industrial enterprises across the world that hired Indian migrant labour. For many Indians, especially the low castes impoverished in their homeland, a life as a ‘coolie in the lines’ was the promise of some sort of roof over one’s head and the prospect of remittances for the family at home. ‘Coolie’, as *The Hobson-Jobson* glossary explains, referred broadly to a ‘hired labourer, or burden-carrier’, but as a particular *nomen*

*gentile*, it originally signified something very close to ‘slave’.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, pre-1920 labour indenture systems have been compared to slavery,<sup>21</sup> and recent scholarship has proposed a concept of ‘Coolitude’ to understand the historical plight of those indentured overseas.<sup>22</sup> Scattered evidence suggests that Indians were not always better off in early Company Abadan than the ‘coolies’ toiling in the tropical plantations of the Fijis and Guyana.

In 1920, the Government of India, under increasing pressure from disgruntled migrant workers abroad and brewing nationalist discontent at home, contacted the Company to address ‘complaints of alleged ill-treatment’ of Indian employees in Khuzestan. The Government stated that ‘Indian feelings run high’ on matters of labour emigration, and since there was no longer any wartime necessity, the Company’s recruitment of large numbers of unskilled labour for Iran was in fact illegal.<sup>23</sup> This was one out of many signs of tension and disagreement in the triangular power relation of the Company, the British government in London and the Government of India, with the latter regularly expressing concern about issues related to British-Indian subjects in Persia.

The first labour unrest in Khuzestan occurred in 1914, but it was in fact Indians who organized the first mass strike. In December 1920, some 3,000 Indian employees demanded higher wages, a reduction in work hours, additional pay for overtime work, improvement of living conditions and ‘an end to vilification and molestation of workers by staff members’.<sup>24</sup> Since many strikers were from the Punjab, their protests were probably influenced by the 1919 massacre in Amritsar.<sup>25</sup> The following day, Iranian and Arab labourers followed suit and laid down work. Even though the Company agreed to an 80 per cent increase in wages and promised improvements, discontent continued. The Indians had thus helped introduce a new kind of political agency, as Stephanie Cronin points out,<sup>26</sup> setting in motion a long history of industrial action in Iran.



In 1922, former employees complained in the *Bombay Chronicle* about the inhumane conditions under which workers were shipped to, worked in and lived with in Khuzestan. One of these employees, A.T. Mudliar, described life as a subaltern in Abadan as follows:

The treatment meted [*sic*] out to the Indian workmen is on the whole very bad and quite unbecoming. This maltreatment of setting up class hatred even in a foreign land is unbearable. No notice is taken of complaints of infringement of social privileges in a public space. Even complaints of assaults are allowed to pass over, so much so, even if the worst were to happen, it will not see the light of day.<sup>27</sup>

These statements prompted an official British inquiry, which simply rejected all charges of ill treatment. The British consul at Ahwaz even interviewed Mudliar about his writings in the *Chronicle*. When asked what he had meant by ‘class hatred’, Mudliar replied that it was a reference to both ‘the stirring up of strife between different classes of Indians’ and the ‘racial prejudice exhibited by Europeans in their treatment of Indians’.<sup>28</sup> The official inquiry, however, concluded that the Indians were in fact treated much better than other employees and enjoyed excellent accommodation and access to medical services.<sup>29</sup>

Also in 1922, Company-paid Arab tribes and the British-Indian regiment stationed in Basra attacked striking workers in Abadan who had demanded a doubling of wages. This strike saw Indians and Iranians united in action, but Sikh Indians bore the brunt of repression: 2,000 were dismissed and expelled in the clampdown.<sup>30</sup> At a general meeting in London, Company representatives had to excuse delays in refinery extensions by reference to troubles created by ‘seditionist agents’.<sup>31</sup> There was again unrest when, in 1924, an Indian mechanic organized a workmen’s union and a general strike in Masjed-e Soleyman north of Abadan.<sup>32</sup> Once again, the Company responded with deportations of Sikhs. While Iranians filled the

ranks of low-level occupations left by the rebellious Sikhs, Indian labour retained mid-level occupations.

As Dobe concludes, the combined pressure of recurrent Indian-led protests, Tehran's increasingly vocal demands and Iranian public opinion forced the Company into gradually adopting a 'Persianisation' recruitment policy. The old labour recruitment system in India was abolished in 1926, and a training program introduced to educate Iranian replacements for the Indian specialized labour – even for cooks.<sup>33</sup> However, in reality, the Company still found it very difficult or undesirable to replace the Indians. Well into the 1930s and '40s, it was still Indian engineers who trained and directed Iranian artisans. Even though Iran again complained over the use of Indian labour in 1933, the Company started new recruitments in the Punjab in 1934.<sup>34</sup>

### **Violence in the Lines: Order and Disorder**

The working conditions in Khuzestan were harsh, with long summers dominated by extreme heat and tasks that entailed significant risks and dangers. Work hours were long, breaks few and holidays very rare. Wages were low and employment subject to fluctuating Company demand. The labourers had very few avenues for expressing discontent, and as scholars such as Cronin have documented, the 'intimidation of the workforce in the interest of political and industrial discipline was notorious'.<sup>35</sup>

In the absence of an Iranian state apparatus and official law enforcement, the Company relied in the early days of Khuzestan operations on various legally dubious security measures. These included the Company's own police force and militias, networks of informants and the use of tribal Arab mercenaries as storm troopers in the event of labour unrest. The range of coercive measures and the scope of political interferences in Khuzestani bureaucracy is testimony to the breadth and profundity of Company power in Iranian affairs.

However, this local exercise of power rested on an ambiguous legitimacy. As far back as 1924, diplomats had warned of the ‘difficulties arising from [the] anomaly of [the] company’s police in Persia’.<sup>36</sup> The ambiguity also included the security questions connected with the Indian presence.

While there are popular narratives of positive interaction between Indians and Iranians in Abadan, there is also scattered evidence of a long history of inter-communal tension and violence. Some of the tension ostensibly stemmed from different cultural values between locals and imported labour. As early as 1914, the Arab Sheikh of Mohammerah complained to the British consul at Bushehr about the behaviour of Indian workers. A Company officer responded that ‘a really efficient police force’ was needed to deal with problems such as drinking and gambling among the Indians.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the Company was concerned that among its many temporary Indian labourers there could be ‘a good many fugitives from justice and other bad characters’ – particularly among ‘the Pathans’.<sup>38</sup> The Company pressured the Government of India to share the expenses of maintaining in Abadan an Indian police force that could also ‘quell disturbances’, which indicated that concerns were not limited to petty crime.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, the Company was also concerned with protecting Indians, as British subjects, against the violence of Arab tribal guards.

In 1915, a row occurred between ‘Hindoos and Mohamedans over a water-tap at one of the mud lines’ that resulted in a general melee with several injured on both sides.<sup>40</sup> While the mention in Company reports of religious denominations rather than nationality indicates a sectarian aspect, the incident seemed rooted in a much more mundane issue of water access. Similarly, in 1925, the Director at Abadan wrote that due to the political climate and ‘our peculiar circumstances in Persia’, it would be unwise to lay down ‘a hard and fast rule between Indians and Persians’ on how to divide privileges such as access to housing among

the labourers. In other words, the Company was aware of the tensions created by its social engineering.

Indians, in particular Hindus, were undoubtedly subject to prejudices. Ferrier relates that the 'Indians were frequently restless and suffered from some cultural claustrophobia in an alien and not always sympathetic environment'.<sup>41</sup> Latent racism in the Iranian nationalist and leftist movements also extended to attacks on Indians in conjunction with anti-Company agitation. In one notable example quoted by several scholars, a 1929 *shabname* (underground pamphlet) lamented that the Iranians, as 'glorious and noble sons of Darius', were ruled over by 'the half-burnt people from the Equator'.<sup>42</sup> Yet it also seems that the cultural dimensions of the Indian-Iranian tensions in Abadan were, if not a product of, then at least compounded by the social inequality in the Company labour hierarchy.

The relatively more privileged position of some Indian employees created much discontent among the Iranians. A 1927 article in the Persian-language newspaper *Habl-ol-matin* lamented that at the hospital in Abadan, Iranians had to 'stand around like the Persian Jews of old until such time as all of the Indians, Iraqis and the Jews have been attended to'.<sup>43</sup> As an article quoted by Kaveh Bayat from a 1928 issue of the *Shafaq-e sorkh* newspaper shows, Iranians believed that Indians were hired, despite being more costly, only to prevent Iranians from climbing the labour hierarchy and organizing to demand their rights.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, the British routinely placed Indians, Jews and Christians in the role of *sarkar* (foremen) to control the Iranian, Muslim workforce, and this domination often took the form of violence. As a key labour activist, Yusef Eftekhari, recalls:

Tormenting, molesting and beating the workers had become the regular business of the British and their subordinates ... It happened often that the British would kill a worker with beatings and kicks, and unfortunately they were never arrested by judicial

authorities. In the factories of the oil company, beatings and insults were such a regular occurrence that even the Armenians and Indians favoured by ‘the masters’ [the British] would severely beat and injure the [Iranian] workers.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the fact that the Company had historically not treated Indians much better than Iranian labour, there were few if any indications of solidarity between the two groups beyond the early strikes. On the contrary, the general Iranian perception of Indians seems to have been that they were lackeys of British imperialism and symbols of Company injustice. This negative image of Indians was exacerbated by the occasional presence on Iranian soil of Indian troops in British service.<sup>46</sup>

When Reza Shah consolidated Iranian state rule in Khuzestan after 1925, the Company could no longer rely on autonomous tribal leaders to enforce its rule locally. Instead of merely buying off local strongmen, it now had to engage in an exceedingly complex game of meddling in Iranian administrative affairs while lobbying for British interventions on its behalf. In the Concession, the Company utilized a broad range of coercive mechanisms to secure oil output. Nominally legal measures included the use of the Iranian police, gendarmerie, military and juridical authorities to maintain order. The Company constantly expressed concern with the safety of its assets and personnel and dissatisfaction with the skills and integrity of Iranian police. A relentless scuffle took place between the Company and the Iranian state, with the former demanding more and better policing and the latter seeking to relegate such expenses to the Company. This scuffle particularly intensified when the Concession was rocked by labour unrest in the 1920s and again in the 1940s. During these crises, Iranian nationalists would criticize the ways the Company operated in Khuzestan as a space of exception to Iranian law and sovereignty.

The ethnic lines along which labour was hierarchized in this quasi-colonial space of exception generated discontent, which sometimes boiled over into violence. In March 1928, a rumour that 10,000 Iranians were to be fired and replaced by Indians sparked riots and attacks on Company buildings.<sup>47</sup> During the momentous 1929 strike in Abadan, Indian drivers were pulled out of cars carrying British Company officers. From the late 1920s, the increasingly anti-British Persian press reminded readers of British favouritism towards Indians, and in 1932, the Iranian government quoted this favouritism as one of the reasons for the cancellation of the original D'Arcy Concession.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, a growing Iranian nationalist movement interpreted the Company's social control and the movement of Indian labour to Khuzestan as an extension of British imperialism. At the time of the Bahmashir Incident in December 1942, there were 1,716 Indians out of a total workforce of 44,292.<sup>49</sup> The important difference was that by then, Indians had generally moved to a higher-paid category in the labour hierarchy. This elevation was reflected in the shift in Company vernacular about Abadan's physical space, from 'the Coolie Lines' and 'mud lines' to 'the Indian Lines'.

### **Drawing the Lines: Spatial Politics of Coercion**

The horrible living conditions of most oil workers in the early days of the Concession are a well-known topic.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the Company's unwillingness or inability to provide adequate housing for the rapidly growing population was a constant theme in Company-state relations. All urban planning in Abadan had the aim of facilitating the sole purpose of the city: oil refinement and export. These sensitive industrial processes required that particular security measures were embedded into the fabric of the city. As colonial experience from India had taught the planners, a constantly growing, heterogeneous and restive population was a key challenge to running an efficient business operation. To meet this challenge, the Company

pursued a strategy of spatial coercion, which, I will argue, generated tensions and violence – including the Indian-Iranian animosity that resulted in the Bahmashir Incident.

Before the expansion of Abadan in the 1930s, there was, on the one hand, the Company-built ‘bungalow area’, and on the other, Abadan Town. The latter, in the words of Crinson, ‘was not the Abadan [the British] knew but an overcrowded insalubrious area, the supplier of non-European labour, the ubiquitous ‘native city’ of colonial imagination’.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, as Visser points out, Company planning was mostly focused on insulating the European-inhabited area from the real and imagined germs of the natives.<sup>52</sup>

New workers swarmed in, but Abadan city, located on a small island squeezed in between two rivers, was inhibited from expanding. This geographic confinement generated, to the Company’s concern, a tinderbox threat of social disorder. Urban planners recommended building a number of separate, small townships that, in the words of its architect, would be ‘more easily and efficiently controlled’.<sup>53</sup> As Ehsani points out, the new plans for Abadan were marked by a ‘glaring contradiction’ between ‘formal’ and ‘informal’ space: in the blueprints, ‘all unpredictable and spontaneous elements had been eliminated’, and ‘all details of collective as well as private life in the new urban space had been subjected to conscious planning and design’.<sup>54</sup>

Most importantly, the space was divided according to rank in the labour hierarchy: residential spaces were assigned to particular ethnic and social groups, and even the public spaces within and between the neighbourhoods were often segregated.<sup>55</sup> There were, for example, separate drinking fountains for Iranians and non-Iranians, and the Company made sure that British employees did not have to share the library and hospital with the Indians.<sup>56</sup>

The refinery itself, as both Crinson and Ehsani point out, acted as a formidable metal barrier in the centre of Abadan Island. In its protective shadow, the British staff lived in the top-class Braim neighbourhood with its spacious villas, neatly manicured lawns, clean streets,

full infrastructure of modern amenities and entertainment including billiard clubs, boat races, cricket matches, flower shows and cinemas. From this comfortable distance, the British could nurture what Ferrier calls an 'enclave mentality',<sup>57</sup> fraternising with non-British only if necessary.

At the other socio-geographic extreme was Ahmadabad, which was legally outside Company-owned land but of great importance, since 60 per cent of its inhabitants were Company employees.<sup>58</sup> Ahmadabad was originally built by Abadan municipality and later turned into what Ehsani calls a 'workers' squatter neighborhood': it was marked by 'a 'native' architecture, bazaars, 'informal' residential and commercial neighborhoods, illegal hovels and shanties, and especially forbidden places housing brothels, drug sellers, and smugglers, who made the most of the city's location on the border'.<sup>59</sup> In the 1940s, most of Ahmadabad had paved roads and electricity, but drinking water was found only in public fountains, the sewage system was primitive, there were no parks or recreational facilities and the neighbourhood was infamous for diseases.<sup>60</sup>

However, there was, as already indicated, a third layer in between the two extremes of Braim and Ahmadabad: the Indian Lines in the Bahmashir neighbourhood, squeezed in between the refinery and Ahmadabad, consisting of lines of barrack-like huts, small but equipped with certain modern amenities. While this Company-built neighbourhood was nowhere near as posh and clean as Braim, in the 1940s it was still a far cry from the squalor of Ahmadabad. The Indian Lines had surfaced roads, electricity, piped drinking water and a sewage system. The Indians had an exclusive Artisans' Club, sports facilities and access to a nearby park. As compensation claims from the Bahmashir Incident tell us, some Indians even retained Iranian servants.

The military-colonial etymology of 'the Indian Lines', I propose, had the psychological effect on Abadan's British community of a defence line cordoning off the ever-



increasing pressure of the Iranian masses in Ahmadabad and the shantytowns. More broadly, the Indian presence provided a sense of protection and familiarity to the British in Abadan: the servants catering for their familiar food; the loyal regiment ready to be mobilized for their defence; the drivers navigating them through the 'native' areas; and, indeed, the very spatial unit of the Lines itself to separate white/British Abadan from 'dark'/non-British Abadan by a human-geographic layer of 'semi-British'. All these were reassuring, convenient aspects in a daily life that many British in 1940s Abadan must have felt was increasingly threatened by disorder, violence, anti-colonial nationalism and war.

Since the colonial legacy of social coercion was manifested physically in Abadan's urban space, disruption of order in this space was a sign of resistance. As Gail Ching-Liang Low points out in her deconstruction of Kipling's *City of Dreadful Night*, the quintessential Anglo-Indian town – and, I will argue, thus also Abadan – was based on a topos of linearity and geometry:

These geometric lines are not only literal descriptions of the physical settlement patterns of the European community, but are also vivid testimonies to the culture's persistent interest in demarcation, naming and segregation. The obsession with walls, detachment and spaces-in-between signals a fear, an imagined pressure from the native quarters, whose bodily secretions and metaphorical productivity threaten to run riot and spill over established boundaries. Lines of demarcation were also lines of defence.<sup>61</sup>

Whereas in the early days of oil extraction, Khuzestan was a lawless, isolated frontier, 1940s Abadan was a complex multi-cultural centre harbouring a diverse population, dissident movements and urban angst. By the time of World War II and the 1941 British-Soviet invasion of Iran, the socially engineered *modus vivendi* in Abadan, which rested on the

Company's spatial coercion, was challenged from multiple angles – and the Indians soon became targets.

### **Crossing the Lines: the Bahmashir Incident**

On 19 December 1942, two separate episodes of violence led to the Bahmashir Incident. In subsequent reports, the Labour Superintendent recounted that around 2 p.m., three Indian soldiers had gone to visit 'a certain prostitute in the Abadan Bazaar' in Ahmadabad, and apparently left without paying for the services rendered.<sup>62</sup> In the ensuing melee, locals confronted the soldiers, attacked them with stones and chased them out of the bazaar. While this disturbance seemed to be over by 4 p.m., other Indians, unrelated to the incident, were being harassed in the bazaar. Rumours were rampant among the Iranians, many of whom were in the streets of Ahmadabad because 19 December also happened to be '*eyd-e qorban*' (Festival of Sacrifice, a Muslim holiday) and thus one of the very rare breaks in the oil worker calendar.

The second incident also took place in the bazaar. Some six Indian employees of the Company, who had been engaged in a bout of '*araq*' drinking, went into the streets and reportedly abused a local boy and some women passing by. According to Company reports, policemen, under the control of the Iranian municipal authorities, were called to the scene, but instead of quelling the disturbance, they exacerbated the situation by shouting 'Catch the Indians, they are insulting our womenfolk!' The ensuing unrest was described in a Company report as follows:

The news that the Indians were doing this and that spread like wildfire, and the hooligans and the riff-raff, taking advantage of the situation, spread all sorts of news, and many self-styled leaders jumped into the 'field of action' and ran to the Indian

residential area. The batch of policemen who had at first chased them were among the crowd, still shouting the same words. The Ahmedabad population heard all these stories related to them by clever [*corrected in handwriting: 'rogues'*] in their own fashion. The 2 o'clock incident of the soldiers had not quite lost its effect when this occurred. The mob had increased in size as it reached the Indian quarters, and then all sorts of hangers-on rushed up and started the general loot of the Indian quarters.<sup>63</sup>

Two scuffles in the bazaar had thus led inhabitants of Ahmadabad to cross the fences around their neighbourhood to attack and ransack the Indian Lines. Indians were forced out of their houses and chased by mobs. Some Indians took refuge on rooftops and in the Apprentice Training Shop, others barricaded themselves in The Artisans' Club. The police reportedly shot bullets into the air to disperse Indians defending their property. Some 30 houses belonging to Indians were raided and looted, and 'at the end of an hour over 80 Indian employees of the Company had lost practically everything they possessed'.<sup>64</sup> At the end of the day, 12 people were injured, including seven Indians and five Iranians, two of whom died in hospital from their injuries.

Shortly after the attack, a Sikh Guard took up positions to protect the Indian neighbourhood. Some Polish troops also showed up at the scene in two armoured cars, but reportedly did not intervene.<sup>65</sup> To calm down the agitated Indians, who were 'badly shaken' and 'no less frightened of the [Iranian] police than of the mob'<sup>66</sup>, the Company promised to repair quarters and feed those now homeless. The Sikh Guard was retained to assure the Indians' safety. However, the Company also demanded that the Indians return to work as soon as possible and threatened to 'deal suitably' with those who did not.<sup>67</sup> Two days after the incident, the Indians were back to work and the situation, the Company claimed, had returned

to 'normal'. The question such a claim begs, of course, is: what constituted *normal*? What could have caused such an animosity?

On the surface, the incident can be read as a case of religious, cultural inter-communal tension: Indians, probably Hindus, and certainly acting disrespectfully, had angered the Muslim sensitivities of people in Ahmadabad, possibly also dishonouring women or breaking other codes of conduct. The religious-cultural coding does appear prominent: the incident occurred on a holy day, there was religiously unlawful behaviour involved (prostitution and alcohol consumption), and the attackers reportedly shouted slogans about (gendered) honour (*namus*). The incident started, as has often been the case in Iranian history, in the bazaar and spilled over from this traditional space into the modern spaces of Bahmashir.

However tempting, I will argue that it is wrong to succumb to an analysis that reduces the violence to something conditioned by culture and ethnicity, or even racism and sectarianism. While the violence was certainly coded culturally, the animosity was, I propose, rooted in social inequality and spatial coercion. Indeed, the records show that the looters in particular stole foodstuffs and furniture from the Indian Lines. Rather than an act of sectarian rage or nationalist fury, the ransacking of the Indian Lines thus represented a rare opportunity for desperately impoverished Iranians to gain immediate material advantages. In this respect, it is important to situate the Bahmashir Incident within the context of World War II.

Throughout 1941-42, attacks by armed robbers on Company personnel in Khuzestan increased, as did theft of Company property. In early December 1942, a secret memorandum warned that since 'the entry into Iran of Allied Forces, there has been a gradual and progressive deterioration of security throughout the country'.<sup>68</sup> The 1941 British occupation of southern Iran obviously had oil security as a key objective, and the Company lent its infrastructure to the war effort.<sup>69</sup> Fearing that employees would abandon Abadan, London issued an Order in Council to prevent British (including Indian) subjects from leaving jobs

that were now considered essential to the national war effort. There were reports of low morale among employees.<sup>70</sup> At the same time, the extent of Company militarization meant that its security operations could at times hardly be distinguished from those of the British military. The official correspondence speaks volumes about this ambiguity of power.<sup>71</sup>

To project power more comprehensively and, ostensibly, to prevent sabotage, both British military authorities and the Company wished to make Khuzestan ‘a special military zone’ under martial law.<sup>72</sup> Any future Iranian Military Governor should, the Company stressed, be able to act completely independent of Tehran – in other words, under Company command. On the pretext of wartime exigencies and in a situation where Iranian central authority had all but broken down, the Company was already in the process of institutionalising its own unilateral security measure: an identity card scheme that would give it total control over movement in Abadan, not only of employees but also of ‘the Persian non-Company civilians’.<sup>73</sup> It seemed, however, as if the Company still needed one final excuse to enforce a special military zone. It came in the form of the Bahmashir Incident.

The war had by 1942 intensified Abadan’s socio-economic problems. In the first years of war, Company investment dropped drastically and the number of employees in Khuzestan fell from 51,000 in 1939 to 26,000 in 1942. As was the usual practice, workers were simply dismissed from one day to the next, left with no income to endure already appalling conditions. Cutbacks coincided with a severe famine raging throughout Iran that was worsened by the war. Iranians flocked from across the country to Khuzestan in search of work only to join the masses of unemployed in areas such as Ahmadabad. The shortage of materials even forced many to live under the open sky. The 1940s also saw several outbreaks of typhus and smallpox in Abadan’s shantytowns, and an investigation in 1943-44 showed that ‘malnutrition was very common’.<sup>74</sup> Due to food shortages, the Company had to institute a system of rationing, and since this system favoured Europeans, it generated discontent.

There thus seemed to be, among the people of Ahmadabad, plenty of material reasons and motivation for raiding the Indian Lines. In this sense, it can be classified as a bread riot. Nonetheless, whether intended or not, the Bahmashir Incident also sent a broader political signal to the rulers of Abadan. Even though Company reports contain no evidence of political demands or ideological slogans among the attackers, and even though the Company sought to dismiss the unrest as the work of criminals and hooligans, the language used in its reports ('agitators', 'clever rogues') insinuated the presence of a political enemy. It is worth noting that at least one of the scuffles that led to the attack on the Indian Lines started with the behaviour of Indian soldiers, who were part of an occupying British force in Iran.

While the existence of the Indian Lines underscores that subaltern agency in Company Abadan was more diverse than that presented in most Iranian labour movement narratives, Abadan was nonetheless a city marked and marred by the same colonial lines of socio-geographic demarcation. The Indian Lines symbolically represented a stage only one step removed from the luxuries of the British neighbourhood of Braim, and the attack on the Lines was therefore also an attack on the British. It was a transgression of the principle of reciprocal exclusivity, which Fanon describes vividly as the 'native's' wish of 'setting himself up in the settler's place':<sup>75</sup> it was an act of motion across boundaries of movement, a violent trespassing of the Company-instituted geography of compartmentalisation, and thus a challenge to the order enforced by the quasi-colonial rulers of Abadan.

### **Mending the Lines: Oil, War and Security**

While the Iranian labour movement undoubtedly perceived the Company as nothing but an extension of British imperialism, the Company could also be seen in a more nuanced light: as a new form of economic imperialism that was rooted in the colonial empires, but would continue to dominate and evolve in a post-colonial world. Such a nuanced light can appear

through a critical reading of the correspondence between the Company, the British government and the British military, especially during a sensitive period such as World War II. Indeed, not only did Company policy sometimes differ from British policy; the Company often operated autonomously and contrary to British recommendations. This had a direct impact on the question of order and disorder in Khuzestan and ultimately the Company's failure to secure its foothold in Iran.

Kaveh Ehsani has previously warned against overstating the colonialist aspect of the Company, arguing instead that even though its claims to 'political impartiality were rather far-fetched', the Company 'nurtured little political appetite' and that it did not wish to become 'another East India Company'.<sup>76</sup> As Reidar Visser notes in a study of British companies in nearby Basra, 'profitability, rather than political concerns, appeared to be the guiding principle when these corporations established their territorial desiderata'.<sup>77</sup> In Abadan, Visser argues, the Company failed to undertake a 'thorough community-building project', like those seen in African mining company towns, simply because it was concerned only with 'the prospect of short-term economic benefit'.<sup>78</sup> Only when strikes restricted oil output in 1929 and 1946 did the Company agree, grudgingly, to make improvements in housing, education and working conditions. The Company was simply not in the business of empire building in the classic colonial sense. This also partly explains why the Company never took full advantage of the nascent Arab nationalist and separatist movements in Khuzestan to turn the Concession into a breakaway state on its own.<sup>79</sup>

For a more nuanced understanding of the nature of Company rule, it is instructive to look at its reaction to the Bahmashir Incident. Firstly, the Company held Abadan's Chief of Police personally responsible, reprimanding him for incompetence and demanding that he oversee a retrieval of the looted goods from Ahmadabad.<sup>80</sup> The very tone of the correspondence leaves no doubt that the Company considered itself a de facto authority.

Secondly, the Company addressed higher authorities in Tehran, including the Iranian Prime Minister. This served a greater purpose: already on the day after the riots, the Company presented the Bahmashir Incident as a final proof of the need to turn not just Abadan but all of Khuzestan into a special military zone.

As usual, the British representative in Tehran backed the Company demand, stating that ‘previous experience’ had shown ‘that the imposition of severe penalties’ and ‘personal mutilation of offenders’, were ‘effective in engendering a respect to the laws and in achieving obedience to them’.<sup>81</sup> Even though he did not ‘recommend’ such severe measures, it was ‘quite clear that until evildoers are brought to book and adequately punished no form of security in this area can be expected’.<sup>82</sup> He concluded that if the police was unable to handle the Bahmashir Incident, then it would also be incapable of acting against looting, which he felt ‘could be expected certainly as a result of air raids or other forms of attack’.

The Company itself flat out called for a British military intervention in the Concession – possibly in the hope that such an intervention could further consolidate Company authority in Khuzestan. However, the military authorities disagreed with this crucial assessment. On 12 January 1943, the Headquarters reported to the Company:

The disturbance on the 19 Dec. 42 [the Bahmashir Incident] was intercommunal and there is not the slightest evidence or any possibility that the disorder was occasioned by anti-British feeling or directed towards interfering with the work of the Refinery ... It is not a British military responsibility to prevent or deal with this sort of disorder. It is purely a matter for the Persian police.<sup>83</sup>



Indeed, the Headquarters concluded, the one battalion already at Abadan was sufficient for dealing with sabotage, and quelling ‘civil disorder’ was not part of its duty. The military instead called on the Company to enforce its own mechanisms of social control:

The best way of preventing a recurrence of fighting and looting between Persians and Indians is for the [Company] to build a really strong fence around the Indian quarters. Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> Dec. the company had allowed a not very formidable fence to fall into dis-repair [*sic*] and Persians were in the habit of passing through this fence at any time they wanted.<sup>84</sup>

The Company and several British diplomats objected. As they had already argued immediately after the riots, ‘improving fences’ would not be sufficient, and they felt that the Bahmashir Incident had afforded ‘proof [of] urgent need [in] declaring Abadan [a] Military Area’.<sup>85</sup> In this fashion, the Company directly linked internal security with that of external strategic concerns arising from the war, and thus prevailed with its demand for a heavy-handed military rule in Khuzestan. The Military Zone was established shortly after and lasted for the duration of the war. In the end, the Company, albeit with British diplomatic backing, had succeeded in pushing through their own demands within Iranian bureaucracy.

This had more or less been the case for over three decades. The expansion of Company operations in the 1920s coincided with the Iranian central state’s consolidation of power in Khuzestan, and this sometimes worked to Company advantage. In other words, the Company – precisely because Iran was not a colony – never attempted to thoroughly institute any of the organisations and services expected from paternalist corporations in colonial states. However, at the same time, the Company did take the liberty, buttressed by British global power and influence over Iranian politics, to unilaterally institute its own systems of spatial

coercion and social control in Khuzestan. The war and incidents such as that in Bahmashir simply offered further tokens of justification.

All this notwithstanding, it seems that, by the time of the Bahmashir Incident, the Company had realized that mending fences, instituting martial law and calling for British military intervention could no longer secure its arbitrary rule over the Concession: the empire in whose shadow the Company exercised its dubious power was threatened and would soon crumble. In this sense, the Bahmashir Incident was one of many events leading up to the 1951 nationalisation movement that would uproot the Company from Khuzestan.

## **Conclusion**

Abadan was at once a frontier of capitalist company expansion, of British military and colonial reach and of centripetal processes towards consolidation of the Iranian nation-state.<sup>86</sup> This particular combination of clashing interests and multiple actors and agencies makes it a remarkable arena for the study of historical change. It also makes the study of ‘forgotten’ events of violence such as the Bahmashir Incident ever more pertinent.

Recent literature teaches us to see oil as a commodity and artefact not just in concrete physical or abstract macro-economic terms, but also on the social micro-scale: ‘one needs to examine carefully the historical and cultural local contexts of oil’, Michael Watts writes in his study of ‘petro-violence’.<sup>87</sup> In a city such as Abadan, shaped by the forces of hydrocarbon capitalism and with the sole purpose of oil export, socio-economic problems and inter-communal tensions were intimately connected to the Company’s nature as an autonomous entity operating in a tenuous space of exception.

Even during a global war in which the Company was under political pressure to continually supply the most strategically important substance for the mechanized British war effort, the Company’s top ‘mission’ was still to secure its own business. To fulfil this mission,

it would use any means available, whether buying off local strongmen or Iranian police, raising its own security forces or compelling Britain, with vague threats of a drop in oil output, to intervene. In short, the Company was first and foremost a business enterprise, and the Concession should not be understood as a mere extension of British imperialism: it was the frontier of another form of imperialism that differed from the colonial legacy upon which it was founded. Company rule in Khuzestan was in this sense a precursor to the 'extractive enclaving' of contemporary multinational corporations in frontiers such as Angola and Nigeria.

These extractive enclaves are characterized by minimal corporate engagement with host societies and by privatized security, as well as by militarisation, violent conflicts and rampant crime. While the present-day extractive enclave (particularly the offshore kind) is virtually disconnected from the national grid of the host country, in 1942 the Company was still dependent on restive local populations and problematic migrant labour and forced to take into account the increasingly nationalistic and uncooperative country within which it operated. While the British occupation of Iran further facilitated the Company's grip on Khuzestan, World War II also added significant strain to an already tense situation. All of these factors played into the Bahmashir Incident.

Since there is a direct link between the particular form of urbanisation seen in Abadan and the violence that occurred both on a daily basis and in moments of 'unrest', it is important not to reduce these links to a struggle between a native labour movement (Iranian) and a foreign colonizer (the British). The presence of Indian labour disrupts such a simplistic model of analysis. This is also why the Bahmashir Incident is never mentioned in Iranian labour movement accounts or, by extension, in scholarly works: it was seemingly banal, it had no clear idealist agenda and it does not cast Iranian workers in the favourable role of freedom

fighters. Compared with the well-studied incidents of labour unrest, the perpetrators of violence cannot be exonerated, so to speak, in the name of anti-British struggles.

Yet it is exactly the banality of the event that underscores the central role of violence in the urban politics of Abadan. Violence was not simply the instrument of the oppressor or the weapon of leftist agitators, but omnipresent and multi-directional. For this reason, we also need to take into account the violence, such as the Bahmashir Incident, that did *not* carry a clear political program. The Company's presence and operations engendered a space of exception in Khuzestan in which violence was explicitly business as usual: it upheld systems of coercion and differentiation aimed at optimizing industrial output; and it made inter-communal violence not only a possibility, but a latent element of an everyday life conditioned by a new breed of global hegemonic forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Bahmashir, today Bahmanshir, was an English corruption of Bahman-Ardashir, the Persian name of the river that flows past Abadan Island on the north side.

<sup>2</sup> E.g., E. Abrahamian. 1988. 'The Strengths and Weaknesses of the Labour Movement in Iran, 1941-1953', in M. Bonine and N. Keddie (eds), *Continuity and Change in Modern Iran*, Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 211-231; K. Bayat. 2007. 'With or Without Workers in Reza Shah's Iran: Abadan, May 1929', in T. Atabaki (ed.), *The State and the Subaltern: Modernization, Society and the State in Turkey and Iran*, 111-121; S. Cronin. 2010. 'Popular Politics, the New State and the Birth of the Iranian Working Class: The 1929 Abadan Oil Refinery Strike', *Middle Eastern Studies* 46(5), 699-732; M. E. Dobe. 2008. *A Long Slow Tutelage in Western Ways of Work: Industrial Education and the Containment of Nationalism in Anglo-Iranian and ARAMCO, 1923-1963*, doctoral dissertation, New Brunswick: Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey; W. M. Floor. 1985. *Labour Unions, Law and Conditions in Iran (1900-1941)*, Durham: University of Durham; and H. Ladjevardi. 1985. *Labour*

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*Unions and Autocracy in Iran*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. Cronin, Dobe and Floor have given brief attention to the Indian element in their respective works.

<sup>3</sup> With its basis in materials from the BP Archive (BPA), the British National Archives (BNA) and the India Office Archives (IOA), this study admittedly suffers from a lack of Indian and Iranian perspectives on the Bahmashir Incident – perspectives that have, to my knowledge, never been recorded. To contextualize, the study instead draws on a wide range of secondary sources and comparative research that will appear from the footnotes. These materials in turn are also the basis for a broader research project on the history of Abadan. I would like to thank Drs. Stephanie Cronin, Kaveh Ehsani, Ulrike Freitag, Touraj Atabaki, Don Watts and Kevan Harris, and in particular Dr. Nelida Fuccaro, for their insightful feedback and critique.

<sup>4</sup> This term was popularized by Abu-Lughod's pioneering sociological study, which analysed the city of Rabat as an entity containing two urban spaces divided by colonial rulers along ethnic lines of apartheid. See: J. L. Abu-Lughod. 1981. *Urban Apartheid in Morocco*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

<sup>5</sup> J. Ferguson. 2005. 'Seeing Like an Oil Company: Space, Security, and Global Capital in Neoliberal Africa', *American Anthropologist* 107(3), 377-382.

<sup>6</sup> Loosely inspired by the works of Carl Schmitt (via S. Legg. 2011. *Spatiality, Sovereignty and Carl Schmitt: Geographies of the Nomos*, London and New York: Routledge) and G. Agamben (2005. *State of Exception*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press), here the term is used specifically to indicate a territorial space in which a (foreign, non-state) entity that derives its legitimacy from an agreement with the nominal local authority (nation-state) brings into question the sovereignty of that space. On the controversial history of Company-Iranian relations, refer to M. Elm. 1992. *Oil, Power and Principle: Iran's Oil Nationalisation and its Aftermath*, Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press; and L.P. Elwell-Sutton. 1955. *Persian Oil: A Study in Power Politics*, London: Lawrence & Wishart.

<sup>7</sup> M. Crinson. 1997. 'Abadan: Planning and Architecture under the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company', *Planning Perspectives* 12(3), 341-359; K. Ehsani. 2003. 'Social Engineering and the Contradictions of Modernization in Khuzestan's Company Towns: A Look at Abadan and Masjed-Soleyman', *International Review of Social History* 48(3), 361-399.

<sup>8</sup> See for example S. Malesevic. 2010. *The Sociology of War and Violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; C. Tilly. 2003. *The Politics of Collective Violence*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

<sup>9</sup> On the direct relation between violence and oil industries, see: R. Dufresne. 2004. 'The Opacity of Oil: Oil Corporations, Internal Violence, and International Law', *Journal of International Law and Politics* 36(2-3), 331-

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394; T. Dunning and L. Wirpsa. 2004. 'Oil and the Political Economy of Conflict in Columbia and Beyond: A Linkage Approach' *Geopolitics* 9(1), 81-108; M. Watts. 2001. 'Petro-Violence: Community, Extraction, and Political Ecology of a Mythic Commodity', in N. Peluso and M. Watts (eds), *Violent Environments*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 189-212; and M. Watts. 2004. 'Resource Curse? Governmentality, Oil and Power in the Niger Delta, Nigeria', *Geopolitics* 9(1), 50-80.

<sup>10</sup> BNA: PRO LAB13/515, 1942.

<sup>11</sup> R. W. Ferrier. 1982. *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Vol. 1: The developing years, 1901-1932*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 153-4.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 6

<sup>13</sup> See for example Elwell-Sutton's accounts (*Persian Oil*, 102-3); on the connections between oil industry culture and racism, see also R. Vitalis. 2004. 'Aramco World: Business and Culture on the Arabian Oil Frontier' in A. Madawi and R. Vitalis (eds), *Counter-Narratives: History, Contemporary Society, and Politics in Saudi Arabia and Yemen*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 151-181.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Until the 1930s, modern notions of an Iranian national identity were still relatively weak among the illiterate rural masses of the geographical periphery. In Khuzestan, there were important divisions between rural and urban groups, between indigenous Khuzestanis (Arabs, Lors, Bakhtiaris, Behbahanis etc.) and newcomers (Persians, Azeris), between Shia and Sunni (migrants from the Persian Gulf) etc. Sometimes the Company exploited these divisions. See for example Abrahamian, 'The Strengths and Weaknesses', and R. C. Elling. 2015. 'A War of Clubs: Inter-Ethnic Violence During the 1946 Oil Strike in Abadan', in N. Fuccaro (ed.). forthcoming. On ethnicity and minorities in Iran, see R. C. Elling. 2013. *Minorities in Iran: Nationalism and Ethnicity after Khomeini*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>16</sup> BNA, FO 371/7818; Ferrier, *The History of British Petroleum*, 401, Table 10.1.

<sup>17</sup> R. Visser. 2007. 'The Gibraltar That Never Was', paper presented to the British World Conference, Bristol, July 11-14, <http://www.historiae.org/abadan.asp>, 6.

<sup>18</sup> Dobe, *A Long Slow Tutelage*, 5.

<sup>19</sup> Crinson, 'Abadan: Planning and Architecture', 347. Today, the Indian influence is still very prevalent in Abadan: Indian loanwords are part of the local dialect, and Indian food is popular at home and in restaurants.

<sup>20</sup> H. Yule. 1903. *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical and Discursive*, New edition, ed. William Brooke, London: J.

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Murray, entry: 'Cooly'. Also note that in Abadan, 'coolie' was sometimes used to signify all non-white labour. See for example the descriptions provided by Jewish employees of a Zionist company in Abadan in Y. Shenhav. 2002. 'The Phenomenology of Colonialism and the Politics of "Difference": European Zionist Emissaries and Arab-Jews in Colonial Abadan', *Social Identities: Journal for the Study of Race, Nation and Culture* 8(4), 527 and 529.

<sup>21</sup> See for example: U. Mahajani. 1977. 'Slavery, Indian Labour and British Colonialism', *Pacific Affairs* 50(2), 263-271.

<sup>22</sup> M. Carter and K. Torabully. 2002. *Coolitude*, London: Anthem Press.

<sup>23</sup> Government of India to APOC, 25 November 1920, in BNA: FO371/6426.

<sup>24</sup> Floor, *Labour Unions*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Dobe, *A Long Slow Tutelage*, 30.

<sup>26</sup> Cronin, 'Popular Politics, the New State'.

<sup>27</sup> BNA: FO371/7818.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., see also Floor, *Labour Unions*, 28-31.

<sup>30</sup> Elwell-Sutton, *Persian Oil*, 68.

<sup>31</sup> BNA: FO371/7818.

<sup>32</sup> Floor, *Labour Unions*, 32.

<sup>33</sup> Dobe, *A Long Slow Tutelage*, 31.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 65, 68.

<sup>35</sup> Cronin, 'Popular Politics, the New State', 715.

<sup>36</sup> Minister, Tehran to Foreign Secretary, Government of India, 2 July 1924, in BNA: FO371/10126.

<sup>37</sup> Manager, Strick, Scott & Co. to H.B.M.'s Consul for Arabistan, Mohammerah, 24 September 1914, in BPA: ArcRef 71754.

<sup>38</sup> Kennion, Mohammerah to Neilson, Tehran, 21 May 1915, in BPA: ArcRef 71754.

<sup>39</sup> Note by Sir Hugh Barnes on Proposed Abadan Police Force, 30 July 1915 in BPA: ArcRef 71754.

<sup>40</sup> BPA: ArcRef 71754.

<sup>41</sup> Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, 275, 402.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted by Cronin, 'Popular Politics, the New State', 720.

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- <sup>43</sup> Translation of an article from *Habl-ol-matin*, published in Calcutta on 2 August 1927, from BPA: ArcRef 129909.
- <sup>44</sup> Mahmoud Khuzestani quoted in Bayat, 'With or Without Workers', 117.
- <sup>45</sup> Eftekhari in M. T. Tafreshi and K. Bayat. 1991. *Khaterat-e dowran-e seperi-shode*, Tehran: Ferdows, 118.
- <sup>46</sup> The notion of the conniving Indian agent of British colonialism is known from literary masterpieces such as Simin Daneshvar's *Savushun* and Iraj Pezeshkzad's *Da'i Jân Nâpel'un* and has existed in popular political mythology for decades.
- <sup>47</sup> Cronin, 'Popular Politics, the New State', 715.
- <sup>48</sup> J. H. Bamberg. 1994. *The History of the British Petroleum Company, Vol. 2: The Anglo-Iranian years, 1928-1954*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 34.
- <sup>49</sup> Ibid., 247.
- <sup>50</sup> See for example Tafreshi and Bayat, *Khaterat-e dowran-e*.
- <sup>51</sup> Crinson, 'Abadan: Planning and Architecture', 342.
- <sup>52</sup> Visser, 'The Gibraltar That Never Was', 6-7.
- <sup>53</sup> BPA quoted by Crinson, 'Abadan: Planning and Architecture', 350.
- <sup>54</sup> Ehsani, 'Social Engineering', 376.
- <sup>55</sup> On 'public space' in Abadan, see *ibid.*, 393, note 55.
- <sup>56</sup> Even when the Company built the ethnically mixed neighbourhood of Bawarda in the 1940s – a project then presented as a progressive measure – this neighbourhood was ultimately inhabited mostly by British and a few British-educated Iranians and Indians.
- <sup>57</sup> Ferrier, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, 6.
- <sup>58</sup> Ehsani, 'Social Engineering', 393.
- <sup>59</sup> Ibid., 392.
- <sup>60</sup> R. Lawless and I. Seccombe. 1993. 'Impact of the Oil Industry on Urbanisation in the Persian Gulf Region', in H. Amirahmadi and S.S. El-Shakhs (eds), *Urban Development in the Muslim World*, New Brunswick, NJ: Center for Urban Policy Research, Rutgers University, 199.
- <sup>61</sup> G. C-L. Low. 1996. *White Skins / Black Masks. Representation and Colonialism*, London, New York: Routledge, 163.
- <sup>62</sup> BPA: ArcRef 68881, 5 January 1943.
- <sup>63</sup> 'Report on the Bahmashir Incident', BPA: ArcRef 68881, 5 January 1943.



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<sup>64</sup> BPA: ArcRef 68881, 22 December 1942.

<sup>65</sup> BNA: FO 248/1435, 21 December 1942. The Polish regiment had been relocated to Abadan due to World War II displacements and put in the service of the Company by the British occupying forces.

<sup>66</sup> Pattinson to Rice, BPA: ArcRef 68881, 22 December 1942.

<sup>67</sup> 'Disturbances in the Artizans Lines', BPA: ArcRef 68881, 20 December 1942.

<sup>68</sup> BPA: ArcRef 43758, 4 December 1942.

<sup>69</sup> See Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, 240.

<sup>70</sup> For a description of life in wartime Abadan, see H. Longhurst. 1959. *Adventure in Oil: the Story of British Petroleum*, London: Sidgwick & Jackson Ltd.: Chapter 10; see also R. C. Elling. 2013. 'The World's Biggest Refinery and the Second World War: Khuzestan, Oil and Security', *Comparative Social Histories of Labour in the Oil Industry* conference, June 2013, Amsterdam.

<sup>71</sup> See for example: BPA: ArcRef 68881, 19 July 1943.

<sup>72</sup> BPA ArcRef 68881, 9 December 1942.

<sup>73</sup> Pattinson to Rice, BP Archives 68881, 9 December 1942.

<sup>74</sup> BPA: ArcRef 25553, quoted in Bamberg, *The History of the British Petroleum Company*, 248-9.

<sup>75</sup> F. Fanon. 1963. *Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington (original ed. 1961), New York: Grove Press, 39.

<sup>76</sup> Ehsani, 'Social Engineering', 365, note 10; 382.

<sup>77</sup> Visser, 'The Gibraltar That Never Was', 2006.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>79</sup> See Elling, 'A War of Clubs'.

<sup>80</sup> 'Disturbances in the Artizans Lines', BPA: ArcRef 68881, 20 December 1942.

<sup>81</sup> Pattinson to Rice, BP Archives 68881, 22 December 1942.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>83</sup> GHQ PAIFORCE to HQ 12 IND DIV., BPA: ArcRef 68881, 12 January 1943.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>85</sup> Pattinson to Sunbury, BPA: ArcRef 68881, 24 December 1942.

<sup>86</sup> For an example of the use of 'frontier' about the Persian Gulf oil industry, see the ground-breaking work of Vitalis, 'Aramco World'; about Khuzestan as a frontier, see Dobe, *A Long Slow Tutelage*.

<sup>87</sup> Watts, 'Petro-Violence', 212.